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## China's New Leadership and Strategic Relations with the United States

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## China's New Leadership and Strategic Relations with the United States

## Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 9 (September 2005)

by Jia Qingguo

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## Introduction

China's new leadership has been in office for more than three years—and during this time, China's relations with the United States have received unprecedented international attention. While all share the view that this relationship is of unparalleled importance to the world as well as to both countries, people disagree as to how such a relationship is going to evolve. Optimists point at the growing interdependence and deepening of the relationship, and argue that the two countries will be able to manage their relationship in a rational and mutually beneficial manner. Pessimists call peoples' attention to the so-called logic of great power politics, and assert that the two countries are destined to get into confrontation and conflicts.<sup>[1]</sup> Many factors will help shape the eventual outcome of the relationship. The way China's new leadership appreciates and deals with the problem certainly matters.

This article represents an attempt to discuss the approach of China's new leadership to, and its take on, China's strategic relations with the United States. It argues that, like its predecessors, China's new leadership attaches great importance to China's relations with the United States—and believes that it is in China's interests to develop a constructive strategic partnership with the United States. Accordingly, it has carefully avoided measures that would jeopardize the relationship, and has sought every opportunity to improve it. In the meantime, however, it has also taken measures to hedge against the potential threat posed by the United States. China's nuclear policy can only be understood within this context.

This article will first discuss the broad strategic orientation of China's new leadership. It will then discuss China's nuclear policy. Finally, it will dwell on opportunities and challenges to Sino-American strategic cooperation.

## China's Strategic Orientation

China's attitude toward China-U.S. strategic relationship is part and parcel of its overall strategic orientation. This orientation in short is peaceful development. Just like their predecessors, China's new leaders share the belief that China's future lies in sustained economic growth and social and political improvements. In his carefully prepared speech at the Bo'ao Forum in April 2004, President Hu Jintao stated that China's goal for the first twenty years of this century is to "quadruple the 2000 GDP to US\$4 trillion, with a per capita GDP of US\$3,000," and "further develop the economy, improve democracy, advance science and education, enrich culture, foster greater social harmony, and upgrade the texture of life for the people."<sup>[2]</sup>

By any standards, these goals are extremely ambitious. To begin with, quadrupling China's GDP in twenty years requires at least 7.2 per cent annual growth.<sup>[3]</sup> This is a very difficult task. After more than two decades of rapid growth, China's economic base is already quite large. It has become more and more difficult to achieve high growth for a sustained period as long as twenty years. This is especially true when China is already facing increasing problems in economic growth, such as sharp price hikes with energy and raw materials and saturation of the international market with made-in-China products.

Moreover, it is also a very challenging task for the Chinese Government to "advance science and education, foster greater social harmony, and upgrade the texture of life for the people." It demands significant increase in investment in scientific research, education, cultural development, and help the underprivileged in society through improving the social welfare and public health systems, and enhancing redistribution through a more rigorously implemented progressive taxation system. Finally, it is equally difficult if not more so to undertake political reforms to make decision-making and selection of leaders more transparent and government more accountable. In order to attain these ambitious objectives, the Chinese Government needs all the time and resources it can muster. Under these circumstances, it needs to strive for a peaceful international environment so that it can focus on attaining these ambitious goals.

Moreover, after more than two decades of integration with the outside world, China has acquired an increasing stake in the current international political and economic arrangements. The increasing political and economic linkages between China and the outside world have given China normal channels to express its views, defend its legitimate interests, and promote reforms of the existing international order. Meanwhile, increasing economic relations between China and the outside world have given China an ever larger stake in international stability and prosperity. In 2004, China became the world's third largest trading partner with a foreign trade volume of US\$1,154.74 billion.<sup>[4]</sup> In 2004, it also attracted US\$64.072 billion in foreign investment.<sup>[5]</sup> In March 2005, its foreign reserve stood at US\$659.1 billion, second only to that of Japan.<sup>[6]</sup>

Finally, China's view of international relations has also undergone broad changes:

1. From viewing international relations in ideological terms<sup>[7]</sup> to viewing it in more conventional terms;
2. From viewing international relations as a zero-sum game to viewing it as a positive-sum game; and
3. From suspicion and hostility toward the international system to identifying with it.

These attitudinal changes have in turn contributed to China's conceptualization of its relations with the outside world and definition of the goals and objectives of its security policy in a way that is assuring to the international community. This also helps explain the Chinese Government's advocacy of peaceful development in recent years. Peaceful development makes it necessary for China to undertake the following measures in its external relations:

First, China needs to try to cultivate good relations with the outside world. According to President Hu Jintao:

"China will promote the steady growth of relations with major countries, stick to the principles of building friendship and partnerships as well as security and prosperity with neighbors while combining bilateral friendship with regional co-operation... China will also strengthen unity and co-operation with developing countries and support their just and rational appeals in international affairs."<sup>[8]</sup>

Second, China needs to strive for resolution of international problems through multilateral cooperation. Multilateral cooperation is required for the maintenance of peace. As former Vice Premier Qian Qichen put it in 2004, "we should opt for multilateralism and give full play to the important role of the UN. Our world is one big family. Naturally, family affairs should be handled by all its members through consultations." The United Nations, Qian said, is "the core of the collective security mechanism and the best venue for multilateral interchanges." It therefore "should continue to play its important role in international affairs. Facts have proved that no major international issues can be tackled by just one or two countries or a group of

therefore should continue to play its important role in international affairs. Facts have proved that no major international issues can be tackled by just one or two countries or a group of countries laying down the law."<sup>[9]</sup>

Multilateral cooperation is also required for the promotion of development. As Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan put it in 2002:

"It would not be in the interest of a sound world economy if the laws of the marketplace were given a free rein to dominate globalization. The international community needs to reform the current rules in the world economy, strengthen guidance and management of the globalization process, take account of fairness and reduce risks while seeking efficiency, and steer globalization in an 'all-win' direction of coexistence."<sup>[10]</sup>

Finally, the Chinese Government realizes that its good intentions may not be reciprocated. Therefore, while it strives for a peaceful international environment and subscribes to multilateralism in dealing with international issues, it also needs to hedge against potential security threat through building up national defense capabilities. The Chinese Government believes that it is necessary especially in the age of high-tech warfare. To the Chinese Government, the Gulf War in 1991 demonstrated to the world that a revolution was taking place in military affairs. High-tech has fundamentally changed the way war is fought: the effective command, the high degree of coordination of various forces, the precision in the attacks especially air strikes, smart bombs, asymmetry of war. As Chinese military analysts put it:

"The forms of war are undergoing changes from mechanization to informationalization. Informationalization has become the key factor in enhancing the warfighting capability of the armed forces. Confrontation between systems has become the principal feature of confrontation on the battlefield. Asymmetrical, non-contiguous and non-linear operations have become important patterns of operations."<sup>[11]</sup>

Accordingly, the Chinese Government decided that China must do more to modernize its military if it ever wishes to feel secure under the circumstances. If the significant increase of defense spending in 1989 and 1990 represented a reward to the PLA for standing firm on the side of the Chinese Government during the political crisis in 1989, the continued hefty growth in defense spending since 1991 reflects its keen awareness of China's security vulnerability in face of the revolution in military affairs. As China's 2004 Defense White Paper puts it: "The world's major countries are making readjustments in their security and military strategies and stepping up transformation of their armed forces by way of developing high-tech weaponry and military equipment and putting forth new military doctrines." Consequently, "the generation gap in military technology between informationalization on the one hand and mechanization and semi-mechanization on the other is still widening, and military imbalance worldwide has further increased. The role played by military power in safeguarding national security is assuming greater prominence."<sup>[12]</sup> Under the circumstances, China finds that it has no alternative but make efforts to keep up with this historical trend if it wishes to assure its security.

As the only superpower in the world, the United States has great influence on China's external environment. Fully appreciating this fact, China attaches great importance to its relations with the United States and has sought every opportunity to develop a cooperative relationship with the United States. In his visit to the United States on May 1, 2002, then Vice President Hu Jintao said:

"History and the reality tell us that cooperation between China and the United States will benefit both while confrontation will leave neither unharmed. A steady, sound and growing China-U.S. relationship serves the fundamental interests of the two peoples and the people of the world and is also in line with the historical trend of human progress."<sup>[13]</sup>

On the whole, China's new leadership is quite satisfied with the current state of China-U.S. relations. In his meeting with President Bush during the APEC informal leadership meeting in Santiago on November 20, 2004, President Hu noted that relations between the two countries had made new headway during the previous four years. High-level dialogue and exchanges at various levels were increasing, coordination and cooperation in such areas as economy and trade, antiterrorism, reconstruction of Iraq, and law enforcement were advancing steadily, and the exchanges between the militaries of China and the United States had basically resumed. He was positive that both China and the United States share extensive common interest and have good reasons to conduct mutually beneficial cooperation in a wide range of areas.<sup>[14]</sup>

In the mean time, China's new leadership is also concerned about the problems in relations between the two countries, in particular, the Taiwan problem. In his meetings with U.S. leaders, President Hu repeatedly points out that properly handling the Taiwan issue is the key to the sound and steady development of China-U.S. relations. He hopes that the United States side recognizes the essence and danger of Taiwan separatist forces and their activities, and honors the commitments that U.S. President George W. Bush has reiterated on many occasions to adhering to the one-China policy, observing the three Sino-U.S. joint communiqués and opposing Taiwan's independence. Hu has also asked the United States to understand and support the efforts of the Chinese government and people to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity and realize the peaceful reunification between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan. He asked the United States not to send any wrong signals to Taiwan separatist forces.<sup>[15]</sup>

China's new leadership hopes that the two countries would enhance cooperation and develop a strategic partnership between them. For this purpose, President Hu made the following proposals to President Bush:

1. Maintaining the sound momentum of high-level exchanges between the two countries;
2. Strengthening the strategic dialogue between the two countries;
3. Giving full play to the role of China-U.S. Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade (JCCT), Joint Economic Committee, and Joint Committee on Science and Technology, and promoting the healthy advance of bilateral economic and trade, financial and technological cooperation; and
4. Continuing to follow the principle of reciprocity and mutual benefit to strengthen cooperation in antiterrorism, law enforcement, health and environmental protection.

He added that both sides should continue to hold close consultations and coordination on the Korean Peninsular nuclear issue, reconstruction of Iraq, and other regional and international issues.<sup>[16]</sup>

### China's Nuclear Policy

China's nuclear policy is part and parcel of its strategic orientation as discussed in the previous passages. China has maintained a nuclear force for two purposes: to free China from nuclear blackmail, and enhance China's security at a minimum cost. In retrospect, China's nuclear policy has eight basic components: minimum deterrence, no first use, no proliferation, security assurance to non nuclear weapon states, security assurance to nuclear weapon states, nuclear disarmament, peaceful resolution of nuclear crisis, and opposition to ballistic missile defense systems.

#### Minimum Deterrence

For many years, China has pursued a policy of minimum deterrence. Although over time its technological sophistication and expanding resources have made it possible for drastic expansion of its nuclear arsenal, China has chosen not to do so. Instead, it has maintained the "barest of abilities to retaliate with nuclear force should they come under nuclear attack."<sup>[17]</sup> In the words of Chinese Ambassador Sha Zukang, "China's nuclear arsenal is the smallest and least advanced among the five nuclear powers."<sup>[18]</sup> As Lt. General Li Jijun, Vice President of the PLA's Academy of Military Science put it in a speech to the U.S. Army War College on July 15, 1997:

"A small arsenal is retained only for the purpose of self-defense... China's strategy is completely defensive, focused only on deterring the possibility of nuclear blackmail being used against China by other nuclear powers."<sup>[19]</sup>

#### No First Use

China announced its no first use policy when it tested its first nuclear bomb in 1964. And it has adhered to this policy ever since. According to its *1998 White Paper on National Defense*,

"From the first day it possessed nuclear weapons, China has solemnly declared its determination not to be the first to use such weapons at any time and in any circumstances, and later undertook unconditionally not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones."<sup>[20]</sup>

According to Chinese Ambassador Hu Xiaodi,

"China initiated that nuclear-weapon states should conclude a treaty on no-first-use of nuclear weapons and undertake unconditionally not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states. China actively supports the Conference of Disarmament in Geneva to re-establish an ad hoc committee on negative security assurances and start without delay substantive work and negotiations. China also supports the negotiation of a protocol on security assurances for non-nuclear-weapon states within the NPT framework."<sup>[21]</sup>

## No Proliferation

For quite some time after China possessed nuclear weapons, China was critical of the nonproliferation regime. China argued that the regime was nothing but an instrument of the nuclear weapons powers to maintain their monopoly. It was therefore unfair and unjust. Despite the criticism, however, China publicly stated that it would not engage in nuclear proliferation. Eventually, China formally subscribed to the nonproliferation regime in 1992. Subsequently, the Chinese Government has taken many steps in compliance to nonproliferation rules.<sup>[22]</sup> For example, in December 2001, the Chinese legislature adopted the Amendments to Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, which designate as criminal offences such acts as illegally manufacturing, trafficking, and transporting radioactive substances and stipulate corresponding criminal punishments for such offences. Also, in February 2002, the Chinese Government promulgated the Provisions on the Administration of Safeguard and Supervision of Nuclear Import and Export and Foreign Nuclear Cooperation.

## Assurance to Non-Nuclear Weapon States

China provides non-nuclear weapon states with unconditional security assurances. It participates in several nuclear weapon free zone treaties in Latin America, the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, and Africa. In doing so, China is prohibited from deploying, using, or threatening to use nuclear weapons in these regions. On April 11, 1995, in UN Security Council Resolution 984, China joined the other four declared nuclear weapon states (United States, Russia, United Kingdom, and France) in providing legally-binding positive security assurances (PSAs) to come to the aid of NNWSs in the event of a nuclear attack against them.<sup>[23]</sup>

## Assurance to Other Nuclear Weapon States

In addition to offering assurances to non-nuclear weapon states, China has also provided assurance to some declared nuclear weapon states as their relations improved. For example, China promised not to target its nuclear weapons against Russia in 1994, and the United States in 1998, and to keep its nuclear weapons at a very low level of alert.

## Nuclear Disarmament

China has been a champion of nuclear disarmament. China's 1998 *Defense White Paper* stated that "all states should negotiate and conclude an international convention on the complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons." In doing so, China believes that the countries which have the largest nuclear arsenals (meaning the United States and Russia) should take the lead in nuclear disarmament.<sup>[24]</sup> It has repeatedly urged these two countries to make deep cuts in their nuclear forces.

## Opposition to BMD

China is opposed to the development of the ballistic missile defense systems. It believes that development of such systems is destabilizing because it encourages nuclear arms races. As far as China is concerned, it would compel China to build more nuclear weapons against its will. According to Ambassador Sha Zukang, China is opposed to the U.S. National Missile Defense (NMD) because it would weaken or neutralize China's very limited deterrence capability:

"China will not allow its legitimate means of self-defense to be weakened or even taken away by anyone in anyway. This is one of the most important aspects of China's national security."<sup>[25]</sup>

## Peaceful Resolution of Nuclear Crisis

While China is firmly supportive of the nonproliferation regime, it does not favor the use of force to deal with the proliferation problems. It believes that such problems should be dealt with through negotiation and dialogue. Force can only be used as a very last resort, consistent with international law, and with explicit authorization from the UN Security Council. Prior to the United States' invasion of Iraq last year, China took the position that force should not be used until all peaceful measures are exhausted. Since the outbreak of the ongoing Korean nuclear crisis, for the same reason, China has repeatedly expressed its opposition to the use of force to deal with the crisis.

## Changes in the Making?

Most people in Chinese foreign policy circles support China's nuclear weapons policy as discussed in the previous passages. They agree that given the domestic and international circumstances China faces, this policy represents the most sensible approach to this issue. Some people, however, do argue for changes to the policy so as to reflect what they believe to be the new international and domestic realities.

To begin with, against a backdrop of the development of the national missile defense (NMD) on the part of the United States, some Chinese analysts point out that the real motive behind such efforts is to neutralize China's limited nuclear deterrence capabilities. In response, they argue, China should increase the number of nuclear weapons or improve its existing stocks to the extent that they can penetrate the NMD and maintain China's minimum deterrence capabilities. In his comment on the United States' development of the NMD on March 14, 2000, Sha Zukang, the then Director General of the Arms Control Department, said that China is opposed to the United States' development of the NMD and would not tolerate weakening or deprivation of its limited means of self-defense in any fashion.<sup>[26]</sup>

In addition, in light of the fact that none of the other four declared nuclear weapon states maintains a no-first use policy, some Chinese argue that China's adherence to it only places China in an unfavorable position. The recent, and widely reported, remarks by Major General Zhu Chenghu on the possible use of nuclear weapons against the United States should the latter attack Chinese targets in the event of a Taiwan Strait military confrontation, for example, are reflective of such a view.<sup>[27]</sup>

Finally, as the Taiwan separatists pushed for independence more and more aggressively in recent years, some Chinese analysts take a more pessimistic view about the future of the cross-strait relations. Under the circumstances, they argue that China should sharply increase its nuclear arsenal so as to deter the United States from military intervention should military actions become necessary to remove the separatist problem in Taiwan. They pointed out that the United States did not intervene in Russia's military operations to deal with the Chechen problem primarily because Russia has a large nuclear arsenal.

Despite these and other views, the Chinese Government has not changed its nuclear policy in any significant way. It still believes that its current time-honored approach best serves China's national interests. However, new international developments are making Chinese rethink some components of this policy. Whether this will lead to significant changes in this policy depends on how China and the outside world interact—and how such interactions affect Chinese perception of how China's nuclear policy best promotes China's national security interests.

## Opportunities and Challenges to Sino-American Strategic Cooperation

With the rise of China, the relationship between China and the United States has become one of the most important bilateral relationships in the twenty-first century. How these two countries manage this relationship is not only going to affect their respective vital interests but also the peace, stability, and prosperity of the world. For obvious reasons, China and the United States need to cooperate with each other so as to avoid costly hostilities and confrontation. It is also in their best interests to take advantage of the power and influence of each other to facilitate their respective interests and ambitions as well as the welfare of the international community.

To begin with, China and the United States need to enhance their existing cooperation against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. They should make greater efforts in consultation with each other, sharing intelligence, enforcing existing international agreements to prevent proliferation, and developing effective measures to close loopholes in the existing international arrangements. They should also promote and support multilateral cooperation to combat WMD proliferation.

In the second place, the two countries need to enhance and expand confidence building measures between them. They should conduct regular strategic dialogues from the highest levels down. Their recent agreement to hold high level bilateral strategic dialogues between the two countries to discuss a wide range of issues is a step in the right direction. They should expand and deepen their existing military to military contacts. They should continue and enhance existing talks on military maritime safety. They should welcome and support each other to play a constructive role in security cooperation in Asia.

In the third place, the two countries need to make greater efforts to promote and support existing regional and global mechanisms of multilateral security cooperation. It is time for the United States to shift from its existing exclusive bilateral security arrangements to some inclusive multilateral security cooperative mechanisms. At the regional level, the two countries should work more closely to attain a peaceful resolution of the Korean nuclear problem through the Six Party Talks. They should also begin to think about the possibility of developing the Six Party Talk-framework into an East Asian security organization. At the global level, they should develop a common set of positions on how to enable the UN Security Council to function more effectively and to develop a new set of international norms to enable the international community to more effectively tackle security problems such as WMD proliferation, terrorism, and transnational criminal activities. It is time to drop ideological pretensions in doing so. The United States should welcome China to join the G-8 summit meetings, and China should get



ready for participation and for playing a constructive role in the meetings.

Finally, for effective cooperation, the two countries should endeavor to develop better mutual understanding and strategic trust. The Taiwan problem has stood in the way of such understanding and trust for too long—it is still limiting and eroding strategic cooperation between the two countries, and even threatens to bring the two countries into military confrontation at times. The three communiqués between the two countries are becoming less and less sufficient for providing assurance to both parties. However, as long as the United States withholds its support for China's unification, China will find it impossible to take a benign view of the United States' intentions on China. Accordingly, it may be time for the two countries to consider a fourth communiqué. In this communiqué, the United States should state clearly and unambiguously that it supports China's peaceful unification. If it wishes, it can also add the term "democratic" before "peaceful unification." Only by doing so can the United States effectively convince the Chinese that it has no intention to split the island from China. China, on the other hand, should also state clearly and unambiguously that it will not use force to deal with the Taiwan problem as long as the Taiwan authorities refrain from taking certain drastic steps to separate Taiwan from China. These steps may meet domestic political opposition in both countries. However, unless they are taken, China and the United States will find it impossible to overcome strategic distrust, let alone attain an adequate level of strategic cooperation.

Strategic cooperation between China and the United States is not just desirable, but is also absolutely necessary for the two countries. Given the nature of their relationship, the two countries will find such cooperation difficult to attain—especially in the context of domestic politics. However, they should recognize that their interests and fates are bound together now. They have no better alternative than cooperation. It is time for leaders of both countries to assume leadership rather than tailing shifting popular political sentiments. They should educate their people on the importance of the relationship and on the necessity for making necessary concessions to attain understanding, trust, and cooperation between the two countries. They should also take the lead in fighting against ideological fundamentalism, explicit and disguised racism, and offensive realism—and make sure that people with these persuasions do not take the central stage and trash the relationship. It is time to show that as leaders, they have the necessary political courage, wisdom, and vision.

#### About the Author

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